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AUTHOR Crohn, Leslie; Hagans, Rex W.
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ABSTRACT

Reforming schools involves change and, like all change, it faces opposition. This 2-part report is designed to help local school and community leaders involved in education who are experiencing growing opposition to school improvement efforts. The first part includes materials and resources educational leaders can use to promote change. Each entry includes information about the publication or resource and a description of its contents or services. The materials and resources are listed under three topics: (1) garnering support for educational reform; (2) understanding the concerns of opposition groups; and (3) adapting policy and procedures in response to opposition. The second part includes information on how to understand community conflicts and promote change; it provides three hypothetical case studies of different communities involved in change. Key to carrying out school-improvement efforts is garnering public support. School leaders must listen carefully to community concerns, concentrate on the majority interest, and be clear about goals. Educators must also understand how their changing communities can influence school-improvement efforts. And the community must be involved in the decisions made during school reform. (First part contains 24 references.) (JPT)

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THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

PROGRAM REPORT

ED 404 720

SEEKING COMMON GROUND ON EDUCATION REFORM

AN ANNOTATED COLLECTION OF RESOURCES

March 1994

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Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500
Portland, Oregon 97204

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INTRODUCTION

Education reform is change, and like all change, it inevitably generates opposition. As reform in education has gained momentum, opposition to it has increased, in both intensity and diversity. The growing intensity with which education reform currently is being opposed, and the increasing diversity of those who oppose it, has resulted in the preparation of this catalog. NWREL hopes that this annotated collection of selected materials helps educators to be balanced and effective in understanding and responding to those who oppose reform efforts.

Dealing with opposition to reform requires different actions in different situations. A community where reform efforts are just beginning to take shape is in a very different situation from another community where reform is well along and opposition to it is organized and vocal. However, there do seem to be broad categories within which educational leaders may operate and for which resources, such as those presented here, might be sought. Three such categories are set forth here as the organizers for the annotated resources presented. They are:

I. Garnering Support for Education Reform

II. Understanding the Concerns of Opposition Groups

III. Adapting Policies and Procedures in Response to Opposition

I. GARNERING SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION REFORM

In the finest of our democratic traditions, dealing with opposition to school reform means we must seek common ground. Educators can listen carefully to the public's concerns, work to build consensus within the community, and keep the focus on student learning. School officials and policy makers are advised to focus on the underlying issues and not write-off critics of reform. As schools increasingly become involved in reform efforts, many community people feel they have something to fear (and lose in the process). The many important things they have to gain can become lost unless there is open, honest debate over such issues as school finance, the role and value of public education, community decision-making, and other reform topics. Educators can lead the way in community conversation, through such strategies as: (1) understanding and embracing the need for change before reform begins; (2) concentrating on the majority of the community--not just vocal critics; (3) using communication technology; (4) using plain talk which is clear, concise, and jargon-free; (5) making discussions and decisions inclusive; and (6) embracing the increased communications which controversy often brings. The materials in this section will assist school personnel in building public support, including substantive research that bears out the accomplishments of education.

Selected Materials:

Berliner, D. (1992, February). *Educational Reform in an Era of Disinformation.* Paper presented at the meeting of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, San Antonio, Texas, 94p. Available from David C. Berliner, Professor of Curriculum and Instruction, and Psychology in Education, College of Education, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, 85287-0911 (phone 602-965-3921; fax 602-965-9144).

> The author, in response to erroneous information about the state of education in the U.S., has compiled statistical research to answer the following charges: (1) today's youth are not as smart as students used to be; (2) the SAT has shown a marked decrease in mean score over the last 25 years, indicating the failure of our schools and our teachers to do their jobs; (3) the performance of American students on standardized achievement tests reveals gross inadequacies; despite our best efforts and extra expenditures, test scores for many schools stay below the nation's average; (4) money doesn't matter; school people are always saying they need more money but there is no relationship between amount spent on education and the productivity of the schools; (5) American schools are too expensive; we spend more on education than any other country in the world and we have little to show for it; and (6) the U.S. is an enormous failure in the international comparisons of educational achievement. The author also proposes five additional goals to the National Goals that address more directly the real failures of our schools.

Bracey, G. (1993, October). "The Third Bracey Report on the Condition of Public Education." *Phi Delta Kappan,* v75, n2, p.104-117. Available from Phi Delta Kappa, Inc., 408 N. Union, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, Indiana, 47402 (phone 1-800-766-1156).

> The author notes that the good news about public schools continues to be ignored, while the bad news about this country's real problems (increasing poverty, decaying cities, and a faltering economy) continues to grow. This article details problems of the cities and the even more intractable problems in impoverished rural areas. Data are presented and refuted regarding the poor performance of American students in relation to students in other countries.

Carson, et al. (1991, May). *Perspectives on Education in America.* Albuquerque, NM: Sandia National Laboratories, Systems Analysis Department, 312p. Available from Heldref Publications, The Journal of Educational Research, 1319 18th St., N.W., Washington, D.C., 20036-1802 (phone 202-296-6267; fax 202-296-5149).

> Sandia began studying the American education system in late February, 1990. The purpose of the study is to provide a foundation for Sandia's planning for its activities in education. A large part of the effort to date has been a detailed analysis of education and demographic data. In addition, Sandia has reviewed

much of the current educational literature, interviewed educators, legislators, business leaders, and parent groups, conducted site visits, and participated in seminars and workshops on education. The study is divided into two major sections: historical performance and future requirements. The first addresses several historical indicators of educational progress, with special emphasis on dropouts and college entrance achievement--two of the more popular measures of school performance and student achievement. In addition, performance on achievement tests is reviewed over time as a measure of basic skills proficiencies. Math and science "pipelines" and the production of technical doctoral degrees often are used as measures of availability for filling technical jobs, and these are studied, along with expenditures for education, performance of U.S. students on international tests, and the status of educators. In considering future requirements, workforce skills and changing demographics are addressed as well as current efforts to change the public education system.

Education Commission of the States (1993). *What Communities Should Know and Be Able to Do About Education.* Denver, CO: ECS, 40p. Available from the Education Commission of the States, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado, 80202-3427 (phone 303-299-3600).

This publication is designed to help individuals or groups interested in improving math and science education build the sense of community needed to bring about fundamental change in the classroom.

Education Commission of the States (1993). *Communicating About Restructuring.* Denver, CO: ECS, 112p. Available from the Education Commission of the States, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado, 80202-3427 (phone 303-299-3600).

This reference kit helps educators learn how to talk about what they're doing to reform the education system, as well as listen to what community members have to say. Tips are included as well as "how-to's" and examples of things that work in creating effective communication strategies at both the local and state levels.

Feistritzer, C.E. (1993, September). *Report Card on American Education: A State-by-State Analysis 1972-73 to 1992-93.* Washington, D.C.: American Legislative Exchange Council, 70p. Available from the American Legislative Exchange Council, 214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E., Suite 240, Washington, D.C., 20002 (phone 202-547-4646).

In the summer of 1993, the American Legislative Exchange Council asked the author to conduct a comprehensive compilation of education data, using as a model the *State Education Performance Chart* published by the U.S. Department of Education between 1983 and 1990. This study analyzes the latest data available for public elementary and secondary schools for 23 indicators in each state for three milestone years: 1972-73, 1982-83, and 1992-93, in five major sections--student performance, spending, student enrollments, staffing, and structure. The

study found that after 20 years of "reform" and "investment," children are still at risk. Students appear to excel if excellence is expected, courses are challenging, and schools are organized small enough to be managed effectively, on-site by principals, teachers, and parents. The author contends that although this sounds like common sense, it unfortunately has required 20 years of high dollar investment in other reforms which do not work to begin to discover those that do.

Schneider, J. & Houston, P. (1993). *Exploding the Myths: Another Round in the Education Debate.* Arlington, VA: American Association of Educational Service Agencies, 103p. Available from American Association of School Administrators, 1801 N. Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia, 22209 (phone 703-528-0700).

The authors note that those who have targeted the public schools as scapegoats for what's wrong with our economy have educators on the defensive. They realize how difficult it is to stand up against the onslaught when those leveling their criticism include the president and the leaders of major corporations. The authors contend that educators need to trumpet what they do well so that they can concentrate on where improvement is needed. This book: (1) spotlights the facts and refutes the misinformation about how well American education is really performing; (2) provides school administrators with an understanding of what is behind the attack on the schools; (3) assesses the real economic problems of the country and how they do and do not relate to education; (4) discusses why it will be difficult to persuade the public to confront the real problems of the nation; (5) examines some of the most pressing problems facing American education that have been ignored in the rush to reform schools; and (6) offers suggestions about the professional role of educators as they move into the 21st century.

Resources for Help:

AASA-NASE Programs, (1993-94). *Responding Democratically to Opposition Groups.* (703-875-0724).

One-day workshops are offered to help participants learn about the nature and scope of grassroots concerns about school improvement efforts. Program content includes strategies for anticipating and responding to criticism, with an emphasis on solid communications and policy initiatives to create community understanding and garner support and advocacy for reform efforts before problems surface.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE CONCERNS OF OPPOSITION GROUPS

Education reform is occurring at federal, state, local district, and building levels, and includes significant modifications in educational practices, pedagogy, and student learning objectives. In hundreds of communities, educators are hampered in their efforts to make improvements--whole language, integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, performance

assessment, outcomes-based education--by opposition from parent and community groups who see these innovations as contrary to their personal or religious values. Many of the themes in current reform programs are similar because they rely heavily on the results of educational research and best practice. Most reform efforts move away from traditional practice, with its heavy emphasis on lecture and didactic learning, toward more performance-based problem-solving which research has shown to greatly increase the ability to retain and apply what is learned. Several underlying factors make such shifts important, including: (1) the exploding role of information and technology in the global marketplace; (2) major demographic changes in the U.S.; (3) societal changes which have heightened diversity and human rights issues; (4) increasing knowledge about what works, due to advances in educational R&D; and (5) the moral imperative to prepare future generations for the challenges of the 21st Century.

Many of the opposition groups contend that aggressive strategies are necessary to bring back the "old" ways--the social, spiritual, and, especially, the educational structures of the past. These conservative advocates are specifically targeting public education and its materials, methods, and reform efforts, frequently insisting that schools teach only those ideas that are in conformity with traditional beliefs. The materials in this section will assist school personnel in understanding the specific concerns of opposition groups.

Selected Materials:

Barth, P. (1993, October). "The Education Holdup: Peg Luksik and the Right Want to Back Schools into the Future." *Education Week*, v13, n7, p39. Available from Editorial Projects in Education, Inc., 4301 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 250, Washington, D.C., 20008 (phone 202-364-4114).

> Barth notes that resistance to school reform is mobilizing in Christian churches and parents' meetings in Pennsylvania, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Ohio, Iowa, and California, and is rapidly moving into other states. This opposition is being flamed by talk of global conspiracies, psychological manipulation, and supercomputers concealed in federal buildings--theories inspired, according to Barth, by Peg Luksik, a politically ambitious housewife. Though Barth refutes Luksik's misrepresentations of outcome-based education, portfolio assessment, and other reforms, Barth also warns that the failure of policy makers and advocates to recognize and assuage parents' anxieties about educational change leaves a wide middle ground of support open to the religious right for exploitation. Barth says Luksik and her supporters should be taken seriously. Until the public has a better picture of what reform means and why it is needed, the opposition is likely to gain some less radical sympathizers.

Educational Leadership, v51, n4 (1994, January). *Can Public Schools Accommodate Christian Fundamentalists?*, 96p. Available from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1250 N. Pitt Street, Alexandria, Virginia 22314-1453 (phone 703-549-9110).

Articles in this issue address the many concerns of opposition groups including the following:

Molnar, A. "Fundamental Differences?" The author notes that the majority of Fundamentalist Christians are not political activists calling for a relentless cultural war; they do not necessarily hold common views on social, economic, and educational matters. They are, rather, a diverse group, and only a minority advocate extreme right-wing political causes. Though important disagreements between educators and Fundamentalist Christians will perhaps always exist, the author suggests finding common ground through mutual respect and a willingness to acknowledge that each group is motivated by concern for the welfare of children.

Marzano, R. "When Two Worldviews Collide." Different paradigms for understanding the world can bring parents and educators, both concerned for the welfare of children, into conflict. The author investigates the growing literature base from a number of Christian groups that states a conspiracy is under way to enlist American children into an anti-Christian, New Age religion and that educators are a part of this conspiracy.

Simonds, R.L. "A Plea for the Children." Citizens for Excellence in Education (CEE) represents parents who believe that public schools have strayed from their mission of academic excellence and are on a destructive course toward moral decay. This article explores the goals and accomplishments of CEE.

McQuaide, J. & Pliska, A. "The Challenge to Pennsylvania's Education Reform." Controversy over a proposed outcome-based education package in Pennsylvania forced school reformers to eliminate the explicit teaching of values from the curriculum. The author notes that despite the best intentions of those seeking to address the need for ethical behavior and social responsibility, terms such as ethics and values become dirty words when associated with education.

Fege, A. "A Tug-of-War Over Tolerance." Reviewed in this article are the specific battles being played out in our public schools, including those revolving around religion, creationism, sex education, values education, vouchers, school-linked health clinics, and educational reform. At issue is how a school district can maintain intellectual freedom while simultaneously guaranteeing the parent's and community's right to be heard.

Detwiler, F. "A Tale of Two Districts." When citizens groups opposed their reform efforts, one district was intimidated, while the other welcomed democratic discussion. The results of their decisions are reviewed in this article to assist other districts in the same position.

Elshtain, J. et al. (no date given). *A Communitarian Position Paper on the Family.* Washington, D.C.: The Communitarian Network, 30p. Available from The Communitarian Network, 2130 H Street, Suite 714, Washington, D.C., 20052 (phone 202-994-7997; fax 202-994-1639).

This position paper is one in a series prepared for The Communitarian Network and their quarterly *The Responsive Community: Rights and Responsibilities.* The Communitarian Network consists of people and organizations committed to shoring up the moral, social, and political environment of the country. This paper does not argue that the government is the cause of children's problems, nor that governmental inaction is the only problem facing children, but rather that greater effort in areas such as prenatal care, women and infant nutrition, and early childhood health and education would yield significant returns. The Network believes that to reverse the tide of children succumbing to the values of an excessively individualistic, materialistic, and sex-obsessed culture requires the willingness and commitment to invest wisely in proven programs that can help children and strengthen families.

Horace Mann League (1993). *The Religious Right: Beliefs, Goals, and Strategies: A Guide for Public School Administrators.* Summit, NJ: The Horace Mann League, 6p. Available from the Horace Mann League, P.O. Box 252, Summit, New Jersey, 07902 (phone 908-273-8743).

This pamphlet is designed to provide public school administrators with background information about the beliefs, goals, and strategies that are supported by some religious groups. Information is given about: (1) beliefs held by religious organizations; (2) facts about religious organizations; (3) targeted reform activities by religious organizations; (4) check lists so school leaders can work more effectively in situations with the religious far right groups; and (5) sources of additional information.

Jones, J. (1993, November). *No Right Turn: Assuring the Forward Progress of Educational Reform.* Reprinted in WEA Action, v31, n3, p.4-5. Available from Washington Education Association, 33434 Eighth Avenue South, Federal Way, Washington, 98003-6397 (phone 206-941-6700).

The author traces the evolution of the religious right organizations including their nationally orchestrated campaign to replace the American school system with one that is sectarian and traditionally based. These groups have targeted the major institutions that impact our nation's culture: the political and judicial systems, churches, media, public education, and the family. Specific allegations being leveled at educational reform are answered by the author, including: (1) educational reform is a knee jerk reaction of educators trying to cover up the failures of the educational system; (2) educational reform assessment practices invade the lives and privacy of students and parents; (3) educational reform

requires that graduation from high school is based on subjective assessment of a student's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior changes; and (4) educational reform may require home-schooled students to meet the same educational outcomes and competencies as public education students, thus violating the Constitution.

Jones, J. (1990). *What's Left After the Right? A Resource Manual for Educators.* Olympia, WA: Washington Education Association, with funding from the National Education Association, 196p. Available from Washington Education Association, 33434 Eighth Avenue South, Federal Way, Washington, 98003-6397 (phone 206-941-6700).

This manual serves both as a guide for school-community restructuring after a censorship incident and as a source of comprehensive activities to prevent the onset of curricular controversies. The contents offer the following options: (1) data sheets that may be used to enhance educators' knowledge of various aspects of the ultraconservative movement and its impact on public education; (2) staff training activities that develop skills to deal with the unique issues of censor tactics, conflict analysis and resolution and fallacious argument; (3) methods and procedures that promote communication, trust, and pride among staff; (4) guidelines and suggestions for increasing and/or improving community trust and participation in schools; (5) creative ways to stimulate a renewed celebration and appreciation of public education; and (6) sample forms, surveys, policies, academic freedom stateements, and action plans.

Kantor, L.M. (December 1992 - January 1993). "Scared Chaste? Fear-Based Educational Curricula." Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS), v21, n2, 35p. Available from SIECUS, 130 West 42nd Street, Suite 2500, New York, New York, 10036.

This SIECUS Report explores the recent proliferation of sexuality education curricula that rely on fear and shame to discourage students from engaging in sexual behavior. Referred to as abstinence-only curricula, SIECUS contends that these programs typically omit critical information, contain medical misinformation, include sexist and anti-choice bias, and often have a foundation in fundamentalist religious beliefs. These programs are in direct opposition to the goals of comprehensive sexuality education curricula, which seek to help young people in developing a healthy understanding about their sexuality so they can make responsible choices throughout their lives. Over the past year, SIECUS has documented close to 100 communities which have faced organized opposition to family life and sexuality education programs or communities which have been thwarted in their attempts to implement programs by Far Right efforts within their areas. This issue reviews 11 fear-based curricula using the *Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education, Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade* as criteria.

McCarthy, M. (1993, September). "Challenges to the Public School Curriculum: New Targets and Strategies." *Phi Delta Kappan*, v75, n1, p.55-60. Available from Phi Delta Kappa, Inc., 408 N. Union, P.O. Box 789, Bloomington, Indiana, 47402 (phone 1-800-766-1156).

> Conservative challenges to materials used in the public schools are no longer limited to isolated attacks against individual books. In this article, the author alerts readers to powerful tactics now being employed to influence all aspects of the curriculum including litigation, personal persuasion, influencing school boards, and marshaling grassroots support.

Right Wing Watch: A Publication of People for the American Way, v2, n6 (1992, March), 4p. Available from People for the American Way, 2000 M Street, NW, Suite 400, Washington, D.C., 20036.

> This issue addresses outspoken critics from within the religious right including Robert Simonds of the National Association of Christian Educators (NACE)/Citizens for Excellence in Education. According to this newsletter, Simonds' group is distributing a 53-page critique of "America 2000," which characterizes the plan as a "subversive agenda of the educational bureaucracy." Most criticized in the NACE study are educational choice, standards, curriculum which the religious right believes would be behaviorist and value-oriented, and tests which would measure students' attitudes, rather than the traditional three "Rs."

Schlafly, P. (1990, November). "How Children Develop Values: Statement by Phyllis Schlafly to the National Commission on Children Hearing, July 2, 1990." *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, v24, n4, 4p. Available from The Eagle Trust Fund, Box 618, Alton, Illinois, 62002.

> Phyllis Schlafly writes and speaks frequently on education subjects, particularly on parental rights in education and how what she refers to as "psychological curricula" has replaced academic teaching in the public schools. In this newsletter, Schlafly focuses on how children develop values in school--that the approach in education tells the child to construct his or her own value system by getting in touch with his or her feelings and that anything is okay as long as the child is comfortable with the behavior. Schlafly suggests that the classroom is a kind of encounter session and that the teacher is no longer an authority, but rather, one who has become a discussion leader. According to Schlafly, nothing is labeled right or wrong in the classroom, and children are cut loose from their parents' values and standards. She discusses non-directive education, drug education, and sex education as undermining family and parental values.

The School Administrator, n9, v50, (1993, October). *The Far Right Marches into School Governance*, 48p. Available from the American Association of School Administrators, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia, 22209 (phone 703-875-0745).

> This issue addresses the emerging involvement of the religious right in public education. Articles focus on: (1) the move by fundamentalist groups to seek election to local boards of education to push an ultraconservative platform; (2) what members of the Christian Coalition and Citizens for Excellence want from public schools; (3) how one superintendent governs with a school board majority aligned with the religious right; (4) how school leaders work with mainstream citizen coalitions to fight "stealth" board candidacies of religious fundamentalists; (5) how you can tell if candidates for the school board have hidden motives and ways to respond; and (6) the legal implications involved if superintendents stand up to challenges of their innovative programs.

SEDL, (1993, August). "Education Activism of Cultural Conservatives." *Insights on Education Policy and Practice, Special Edition.* Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 20p. Available from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 211 E. Seventh Street, Austin, Texas, 78701 (phone 512-476-6861).

> This document discusses the increasingly visible challenges presented by some "conservatives" to public education agencies over issues of values. The study was requested by SEDL's Board of Directors to examine causes and dynamics of conservatism activism that have arisen in conjunction with current education reform initiatives. To meet the challenges, recommendations are presented for policy makers: (1) examine the content of current activism (what is its source and what does it mean?); (2) become familiar with the major organized activist groups, the specific issues that concern them, and the political strategies they are using; and (3) identify strategies that might successfully address the concerns of activists. The three sections of the document provide a synthesis of information to address each of these needs of policy makers.

Zlatos, B. (1993, September). "Outcomes-Based Outrage." *The Executive Educator*, v15, n9, p.12-16. Available from the Executive Educator, 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, Virginia, 22314 (phone 703-838-6722; fax 703-683-7590).

> In this article, the author traces the the tug-of-war over outcomes-based education. So far, state officials concede, the critics have won the war of words, often by spreading rumors and half-truths. The author asserts that the political heat generated by the attack has become so intense that many advocates fear the reforms will be watered down, rendering them too tame to produce dramatic results. These political realities may make some public officials shy away from the more controversial elements of OBE such as value-oriented outcomes, state mandates, and revisions of content areas and the school calendar. An overview of

state activity in OBE is given including which states have the greatest potential for implementing OBE as a statewide reform effort.

III. ADAPTING POLICIES AND PROCEDURES IN RESPONSE TO OPPOSITION

Policy establishes both direction and balanced, fair processes for action. It provides one of the best opportunities for being proactive in dealing with opposition to reform efforts. School boards, as a proactive stance, need to adopt policies and procedures for selecting learning materials and for dealing with public complaints. A number of professional associations have developed suggested policies and procedures including the National School Boards Association (NSBA), the American Library Association, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and the National Council of Teachers of English. School personnel can obtain publications and other materials regarding the development and implementation of policies and procedures by contacting these organizations.

Selected Materials:

AASA (1993). *Freedom of Thought and Public Education: What Citizens, Educators, and Public Officials Need to Know.* Arlington, VA: American Association of School Administrators, 8p. Available from American Association of School Administrators, 1801 N. Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia, 22209 (phone 703-528-0700).

This pamphlet discusses freedom of thought and tolerance toward others as an important, traditional American value and how it recently has become the subject of bitter and divisive debate. Discussed are some of the national organizations that plan to control public education and impose their own brand of political and religious ideology on the nation's classrooms through "stealth" tactics, misinformation campaigns, and censorship. Suggestions are given for educators and concerned citizens to ensure that democracy and the educational well-being of students are protected as well as for all members of the community. Also discussed are policies and procedures that school boards should adopt for selecting learning materials and for handling complaints: (1) policies and procedures should call for complaints to be specific and in writing--this approach allows the school system to examine the details and true intent of the concern being expressed; (2) building-level concern should first be expressed to appropriate teachers and principals before being taken to the superintendent or school board; (3) if the concern is of a districtwide nature, it should first be presented to the administration and then, if necessary, to the school board; (4) depending on the nature of the concern, a committee might be created to review it and make recommendations to the appropriate person or group in the school system; and (5) polices and procedures should protect the rights of all parties and ensure that appropriate

evidence is considered--this approach places any decision within the context of the purposes and objectives of democratic education.

Jones, J. (1993, April). "Targets of the Right." *The American School Board Journal*, v180, n4, p.22-29. Available from National School Boards Association, 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, Virginia, 22314 (phone 703-838-6722).

The author explores the increasing negative and pervasive attacks on education from the religious right and provides steps school boards can take to protect themselves: (1) ensure that board members, school executives, teachers, counselors, and all other school personnel know about the beliefs, targets, tactics, and objectives of the opposition groups; (2) teach parents and community members about the concepts of censorship, academic freedom, and constitutional rights; (3) reassess and revamp the school system's parent involvement practices; (4) reassess, revamp, and follow district policies and procedures on the selection of textbooks and other materials; (5) establish a district policy of academic freedom and ensure that everyone in the community understands its meaning; (6) request that staff members be constantly updated on the district's education goals and vision; (7) know where the board stands philosophically on potentially emotional issues such as sex education, self-esteem, etc.; (8) review plans for handling conflict; (9) treat every complaint with tact, courtesy, and thoroughness; (10) contact the state school boards association or other groups if the district becomes a target of opposition groups and the issue cannot be resolved through established policy and procedures; (11) encourage parents to contribute information about new materials, programs, committees, budget meetings, board elections, and bond issues; (12) make it a priority to celebrate teachers, students, and parents; and (13) spread the word about public education's successes.

Ledell, M. & Arnsparger, A. (1993). *How to Deal with Community Criticism of School Change*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, in cooperation with the Education Commission of the States, the American Association of School Administrators, and the National Association of State Boards of Education, 40p. Available from the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1250 N. Pitt Street, Alexandria, Virginia, 22314 (phone 703-549-9110; fax 703-549-3891).

The authors contend that educators who propose substantive change in public schools have an obligation to engage and inform the public as well as the obligation to protect schools from being manipulated by special interest groups who seek to misinform the general public or advance a narrow agenda. This book suggests techniques and strategies for dealing with organized opposition. It is written for school personnel who need a strategy for building community understanding and support for restructuring efforts, defined as "making significant changes to improve student learning, not as a specific set of ideas or an educational philosophy." The book helps educators: (1) understand the need for a communications strategy rather than what some people might think of as a public

relations "campaign" to "sell" what it being done; (2) anticipate and respond to critics and pressure groups; (3) invite diverse opinions and ideas; (4) build support for change; and (5) depend on the democratic process to help improve education.

Resources for Help:

National School Boards Association (NSBA) Educational Policies Reference Service (updated monthly). Available from NSBA, 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, Virginia, 22314 (phone 703-838-6722).

The purposes of the Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association are to: (1) assist school boards with their responsibility to have and maintain up-to-date written policies; (2) develop the kinds of policies that improve the educational process and build productive relationships among board, staff, students, and the public; and (3) compile well-organized manuals in which policies are regulations are easily retrievable. Other components of the service include a variety of handbook publications and periodicals written for board members and administrators about policy making and policy trends and issues; an on-call reference service operated by the NSBA Policy Information Clearinghouse; and other aids designed to help school boards maintain up-to-date manuals of policies and regulations.

THE Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

PROGRAM REPORT

POLICY OPTIONS FOR SEEKING COMMON GROUND IN EDUCATION

Leslie Crohn
Rex W. Hagans

March 1994

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
101 S.W. Main Street, Suite 500
Portland, Oregon 97204

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I. INTRODUCTION

Today, the business of improving schools is a struggle for educators and other community leaders. School politics has taken on a whole new meaning as our nation's communities undertake school improvement efforts. School improvement is change, and like all change, it inevitably generates discomfort, resistance, and even opposition. While many community groups clamor for educational change, others aggressively try to stop it from occurring. Misinformation is rampant: some groups demand new programs and materials, others demand their removal. For every proposed school policy or procedure, there are those in support, but also those who oppose and with different degrees of conviction. What's a community leader to do?

Today's climate of change in education calls for a new kind of leadership--leadership that is strong and knowledgeable about what is right for children and young people, vocal about making progress in improving education, yet sensitive and responsive to the needs of the community. This climate of change requires a review of local school policies to ensure they are clear, workable, and crafted in a democratic fashion. Such policies can help community leaders seek common ground in education.

This paper is written for local school and community leaders--board members, superintendents, principals, teachers, committee chairs, business leaders, heads of parent and other community groups--who are experiencing growing opposition to school improvement efforts. Section II of the paper presents and discusses three key dimensions of success in seeking common ground in education:

1. Garnering support for school improvement efforts

2. Understanding community context for school improvement

3. Reviewing policies and procedures to ensure community involvement in school improvement

These three dimensions or "lessons" can help community leaders build broad-based support for school improvement efforts and increase the likelihood they will be implemented effectively.

Section III looks at the role of "context" in seeking common gound. Presented in this section are three "vignettes" or scenarios of local communities considering or undertaking school improvement efforts--and the reactions of individuals and groups within those communities. These scenarios include a stable, tranquil community considering change, a community involved in textbook adoption that is able to successfully head off opposition, and a community undergoing school restructuring facing heavy attack. Major policy

issues and actions are discussed for each type of scenario, including the steps policy leaders can take to address community concerns and maintain support.

It should be noted that the circumstances presented in the scenarios are not "fixed" or static. Local communities likely will experience different circumstances at various points in time, and in no particular order. For example, a local community under intense pressure by a specific group over a particular activity may successfully resolve the issue and enjoy a period of relative quiet until another innovation again raises the ire of some community members or groups. Therefore, the issues and actions are presented on a continuum, each building on the other to help school and community leaders seek common ground.

Section IV discusses how communities can move ahead with school improvement efforts as they encounter increasingly stronger challenges to education policy, currriculum, and practice, focusing on proactive planning and flexibility in order to avoid conflict.

Section V provides a list of references used in the development of this paper. These materials form the basis of a companion piece on education reform also developed by NWREL "Seeking Common Ground on Education Reform: An Annotated Collection of Resources." The catalog contains 31 selected, annotated materials about education reform and is available from NWREL's Document Reproduction Service. The intent of the catalog is to help educators and community leaders be balanced and effective in understanding and responding to those who oppose school improvement activities.

II. THE KEY DIMENSIONS OF SUCCESS

Dealing with opposition to reform requires different actions in different situations. A community where reform efforts are just beginning to take shape is in a very different situation from another community where reform is well along and opposition to it is organized and vocal. However, there do seem to be some broad dimensions or "lessons" for success that can help ensure effective implementation of school improvement activities. These three dimensions are discussed below.

Garnering Support for School Improvement Efforts. In the finest of our democratic traditions, dealing with community concerns about school improvement means we must seek common ground. To do this, community leaders can listen carefully to the public's concerns, work to build consensus within the community, and keep the focus on improved student learning. School and community leaders are advised to focus on the underlying issues of school improvement and not write-off cynics and critics. As schools increasingly become involved in setting and implementing new education policy and practice, many community members and groups feel they have something to fear, or lose, in the process--sometimes, they are correct! Often, reform efforts are demanded of schools by state policy, but school and community leaders can be blamed for the results. The many important things a community has to gain can become lost unless there is open, honest debate over such issues as school finance, the role and value of public education,

community decision-making, the desired outcomes for children and youth, and other school improvement topics. Community leaders can lead the way in fostering open dialogue through such strategies as:

1. Understanding and embracing the need for new or revised goals before school improvement activities begin

2. Concentrating on the majority of the community--not just vocal critics

3. Using communication technology to foster good community relations

4. Using language which is clear, concise, and jargon-free

5. Involving everyone in discussions and decisions

6. Embracing the increased community dialogue which controversy and concern often bring

Understanding Community Context for School Improvement. Educational improvement and change are occurring at federal, state, local district, and building levels, and include significant modifications in educational practices and student learning objectives. In hundreds of communities, school leaders seeking educational improvements (such as whole language, integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, performance assessment, and outcomes-based education) are finding these innovations are raising the concern of some community members and groups who see them as contrary to their personal or religious beliefs, who fear losing control over what their children learn, or who know these innovations only by their titles or slogans. Many of the themes in current school improvement programs are similar because they rely heavily on the results of educational research and "best" practice. Most school improvement efforts are moving away from lecture and didactic teaching (which is familiar to parents and community members), toward more performance-based problem solving which research has shown to greatly increase the ability to retain and apply what is learned (which may be unfamiliar to parents and community members, and therefore, of concern). Several underlying factors make such shifts in education practice important:

1. The expanding role of information and technology in the global marketplace

2. Major demographic changes in the U.S.

3. Societal changes which have heightened diversity and human rights issues

4. Increasing knowledge about what works, due to advances in educational R&D

5. The moral imperative to prepare future generations for the challenges of the 21st Century

There are multiple reasons for individuals and groups to oppose change. Some are direct such as concerns about what some see as sweeping changes in education; some groups and individuals feel that aggressive strategies are necessary to retain what is familiar to them--the social, spiritual, and especially, the educational structures of their own experience. These conservative advocates specifically are targeting public education and its materials, methods, and improvement efforts, frequently insisting that schools teach only those ideas which are in conformity with their own beliefs.

Other reasons are more personal and indirect, such as concerns about taxes, and their attendant effect on property and neighborhoods. The challenge is an educational one: ensuring that improvements being proposed are understood and valued by the community at large, and not coercive of any particular segment.

Reviewing Policies and Procedures to Ensure Community Involvement in School Improvement. Policy establishes both direction and balanced, fair processes for action. It provides one of the best opportunities for being proactive in implementing school improvement efforts. School boards, in a take-charge position, need to ensure policies and procedures involve the community in selecting learning materials, handling complaints and concerns, and making decisions. A number of professional associations have developed suggested policies and procedures including the National School Boards Association (NSBA), the American Library Association, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), and the National Council of Teachers of English. Community leaders can obtain publications and other materials regarding the development and implementation of policies and procedures by contacting these organizations.

III: THE CONTEXT COUNTS!

Following are descriptions of three, hypothetical, local communities contemplating or undergoing change--each illustration could apply to a rural, suburban, or urban setting, large or small. Each scenario describes community attitudes toward school improvement and the decisions made, and directions taken, by community leaders. Discussed for each scenario are the policy issues and actions available to policy leaders and the steps they can take to make change happen.

Community A: "We're Satisfied; Everything's Swell!"

Community A favors the Carnegie Unit model of American education. The school day is driven and determined by a time calendar with the assumption that all students will achieve in about the same time frame--students receive credit based on satisfactory completion of required coursework. Everybody seems to agree about what the desired student results of schooling should be, although these never have been formally articulated. Primarily, the curriculum is driven by the textbooks which are selected on the usual adoption cycle. Students are seen as relatively passive recipients of the information given to them by their

teachers. Assessment is based on the "bell curve" which assumes that some students will fail, some will achieve at high levels, but most will be "average." Students are "tracked" according to ability and "sorted" based on achievement test results and teacher recommendations. Student success is measured almost entirely through standardized test scores. The district office makes almost all decisions about rules, regulations, and instruction, with some input from the building principals.

While there is no community movement to jump on the "school improvement bandwagon," several community leaders, including a building principal, a local church leader, and a school board member, have been discussing the growing number of reports about school reform. This group is becoming more interested in restructuring their own schools to better prepare the young people in the community for the challenges of the 21st Century, including working as a team member, accessing and analyzing data, communicating effectively, and being a responsible, contributing member of society. As one of the leaders put it: "If we don't at least think about change, the future is going to pass us by!"

Policy Issues/Actions

Even though most people in this community are content to maintain the status quo, there is a growing realization by several leaders that schools today face new challenges in preparing young people for future economic and social well-being. Though small, this is an influential group. They understand they are tackling a huge job and there inevitably will be resistance to fixing what most community people think is not broken. Restructuring schools requires broad-based support and understanding from parents, teachers, students, administrators, school board members, business people, taxpayers, legislators, special interest groups, and all other community members. Garnering community support is the critical first step to any school improvement effort. The following policy actions can help build support and allay fears and opposition:

- Prepare a communications plan that focuses on listening to concerns and questions *before* undertaking the school improvement activity. The purpose of the communications plan is to help community leaders build support for school improvement, communicate clearly and directly about what they're doing, and anticipate and respond to questions and concerns. To build support, community leaders need to know what is important to individuals and groups, and then take this information into account when building the improvement plan. They need to give the community enough accurate information so individuals and groups can learn about the proposed changes and make responsible decisions. Strategies for determining community reactions include:

  Focus Groups: a variety of people are brought together to let them express their ideas about school improvement issues and to find out how they interpret terminology used in school improvement efforts. Focus groups also can be used to help determine: (1) barriers to improvement

efforts and how they can be overcome; (2) who should be involved; and (3) how to gain widespread support. Focus groups should include parents, board members, business representatives, teachers, students, legislators, minority cultures, religious organizations, and any other special interest groups in the community. The media also should be included.

Town Halls/Community Forums: these meetings provide everyone in the community with the opportunity to ask questions and air concerns about proposed changes. The strategy here is to "listen" rather than "tell" people what they should know.

Polls/Surveys: these mechanisms can help find out what people think about proposed changes to determine the extent of support or concern. Polls are usually more scientific and can be done through local newspapers, radio, or television stations. Surveys are more informal and generally involve a greater number of people; special interest groups such as parent organizations or business groups can be effectively targeted through surveys. Community members should be involved in the design of the survey.

"Invited Guest" Meetings: leaders of a particular group important to the school improvement cause such as a parent group, professional association, or the legislature, are invited to talk one-on-one with community leaders. Listening to the concerns of important groups helps to build a support constituency as improvement efforts get under way.

- Identify influential leaders from a broad cross-section of the community to help frame the issues and set the stage for discussion, debate, planning, and action. Select leaders who are:

    1. Involved in community activities, especially education
    2. Knowledgeable about current education, social, and economic issues
    3. Familiar with the media including radio, TV, newspapers, and magazines
    4. Capable of motivating others into action
    5. Receptive to ideas of change

  Include in this group individuals who are active in civic groups, lead community organizations, volunteer frequently in school and community activities, hold positions of leadership or authority in the community, are interested in the education and development of children and youth, and have credibility with a wide variety of audiences.

Community B: "Preparing for Change: Heading Conflict Off at the Pass!"

Last year, Community B was embroiled in a debate surrounding adoption of sexuality education curriculum. A local convervative group spent months trying to get the school board to adopt a sexuality education curriculum that taught abstinence only, omitted certain information about sexuality, contained misinformation, and had a sexist and anti-choice bias. This group was strong, vocal, and insistent. However, the school board approved, instead, a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum which emphasized the development of healthy understandings in young people about their sexuality so they can make responsible decisions throughout their lives. This curriculum adoption was accomplished through community leadership composed of parents, professionals, religious leaders, and a variety of citizens who spent a full year researching family life education, listened to individual perspectives from community members, and released statistics showing how many of the local teenagers were sexually active. General discussion with a wide variety of community groups served to build early support. When the conservative group brought in out-of-state speakers to attack the comprehensive curriculum, the community leaders countered with technical assistance, resources, and support from a national association on adolescent sexuality to provide current research and evaluation materials regarding sexuality education curricula as well as strategies for conducting meetings and securing commitment to rational, reasonable, and research-based curricula. Community meetings were held with nationally recognized sexuality education experts who clearly laid out the sociological reality of the teenage world, the educational objectives of a comprehensive sexuality education, and the inadequacies and fallacies of the curriculum being promoted by the conservative group.

Policy Issues/Actions

Communities around the country are experiencing increasing controversies over textbook adoption. In some cases, local boards have given in to the pressure and dropped the use of a controversial text rather than face board recalls, harrassment, or a divided community. Yet other communities stand by their textbook selections and fight the opposition. This community was able to circumvent trouble by taking some proactive measures. The most important step taken was to increase communication and exchange of accurate, credible information among all community groups about the proposed curriculum. In doing so, these leaders were able to build support and advocacy by reaching out to different audiences. Rather than writing off the conservative group, their concerns were dealt with openly and objectively; both curricula were presented in balanced, fair, and bias-free settings, using expert testimony, research, and statistics to help community members make up their own minds. The following policy actions can help community leaders keep in touch with the prevailing values of their communities and ward off attack:

- Understand the educational rationale for the books, practices, and instructional programs used in the district. Ensure that textbook policies adhere to the district's philosophy, adoption cycles, guidelines related to selection committees, selection

criteria, public display and input, public hearings, final adoption, and guidelines for textbook challenges.

- Keep all community members informed about, and involved in, what the schools do and teach. Ensure that the community at large is represented during the textbook selection process.

- Establish policies and procedures for handling complaints. Have readily available current facts, data, research, and other information to support the cause; policies need to include detailed procedures that are educationally sound, legal, and fair.

- Become familiar with pressure and opposition groups in the community. During community meetings, make the rules for discussion clearly understood, including who will speak, for how long, who votes, etc.

- Work with the press, but don't use the media as the battle field (opponents will be given equal time which can mislead the public about their strength).

- Understand that community concerns about textbook adoption or any school improvement effort are probably bigger and broader and can involve such issues as censorship and parental control.

- Make sure community supporters and respected, credible community members attend all meetings.

Community C: "Change is Well Under Way and We're Up to Our Eyebrows in Alligators!"

For the past eight years, Community C has been actively pursuing a school improvement plan, shifting from traditional schooling to a greater focus on site-based decision making and outcomes-based education. Decisions about what *results* (outcomes) are to be achieved by the students is decided centrally and decisions about *how* to achieve the results have been decentralized to the school level. The schools are held accountable for a schoolwide focus on student results and for frequently measuring progress and taking corrective action. The district is responsible for expecting, supporting, and monitoring schools as they establish and maintain a focus on student results. Until recently, an outcomes-focused school improvement plan was being implemented on schedule and without much fuss.

In 1992, a full-blown attack was made on the school district and outcomes-based education by a number of groups opposing the school improvement plan. These groups cited outcomes-based education as the enemy of traditional family values and set out to elect their candidates to the school board in order to reinstate "traditional" school instruction and practice. These groups included pro-family groups, taxpayer-watchdog organizations, conservative parents, and longtime critics of the state department of

eduction. Members, most of whom lived outside the school district, packed school board meetings; blitzed the media with their charges; handed out pamphlets heralding "pro-family" values at community meetings; waved signs at busy street corners, intersections, and over bridges; and went door-to-door talking about how the schools and outcomes-based education were a federal scheme, designed to undermine parental authority. These groups also attacked other school improvement activities including literacy instruction based on whole language philosophy, environmental education, manipulative mathematics, self-esteem programs, and experiential learning. They demanded access to school records; phone numbers of board members, school administrators and teachers; videotapes of community meetings; a review of curricular materials; and school personnel to attend their meetings. The school board candidates backed by these groups stayed out of sight while their supporters created false issues and challenged the credibility of the schools and other local governmental agencies. The district board and staff wisely feared the coming board elections.

In response, community leaders went into action. They organized a community coalition to raise funds, coordinate public events, conduct issue polling, and endorse mainstream candidates. Recruited for the coalition were people who had served on PTAs, school boards, national education associations, teacher and administrator professional organizations, as well as other respected, well-known community leaders. The coalition endorsed only as many candidates as there were vacancies, calling for concentrated voting to offset the bloc votes of the opposition groups. Particularly effective was the polling effort which revealed that almost 80 percent of the community voters favored outcomes-based education as part of the school improvement plan. Also effectively used was information about these groups who seek to thwart the purposes of democratic government--this information was collected and disseminated widely throughout the community.

The efforts of the coalition were well rewarded. The opposition groups failed to elect their candidates to the school board; in fact, they were roundly trounced! But community leaders are not resting on their laurels--elections come up again in two years.

Policy Issues/Actions

In this scenario, a community whose school improvement efforts had moved along smoothly for a long while, suddenly found itself under close scrutiny and attack. Yet in today's climate of change in education, opposition can occur anytime and anywhere, and it does. All organizations and institutions today (private, public, and nonprofit) must prepare for and address concerns by those who want their say and have their way. Opposition groups often:

1. Use inaccurate and misleading language and materials to describe school improvement efforts.

2. Request inordinate amounts of curricular materials and school records.

3. Monitor teachers during inservice, planning, or classroom time.

4. Support candidates for board elections who reflect their views (or hide their true allegiance to the opposition groups, posing as education supporters).

5. Initiate court action to question the constitutionality of school processes.

6. Charge that school programs are designed to manipulate their children and undermine the family.

Because this community already was involved in implementing an outcomes-based focus, site-based decision making, and other changes, it became necessary for the community leaders to backtrack and regain lost ground. The following policy actions can help community leaders fight off an organized attack and regain the trust and confidence of the majority of community members:

- Ensure that all school people and community supporters are clear about the issues; public schools are responsible for answering questions and addressing concerns.

- Provide an open forum where all issues can be discussed and all points of view expressed; listen carefully to concerns voiced by any individual or group:

  Know in advance who the school and community spokespeople will be.

  Invite the media.

  Involve business people, legislators, and others outside education who understand and support school improvement efforts and who have community respect and credibility.

- Develop clear, consistent, and fair policies for responding to requests for access to materials (school records, data, textbooks, etc.):

  Acknowledge the request, then specify when someone will respond within a reasonable time frame.

  Give the request as much time as appropriate--if the request reflects concerns of a large portion of the community, answer publicly; if the request is for the benefit of a few people, provide enough time to this group that meets their right to know, but does not keep staff from serving the needs of the majority of the community.

Understand exactly what is being requested and respond concisely--large amounts of materials and involved explanations are unnecessary and can look like propaganda.

Obtain benefit of legal counsel if necessary.

Keep the board informed about all unusual requests for materials.

- Provide the community with clear, concise information about school improvement activities (in this case, outcomes-based education and site-based decision making):

  Define terms in clear language and without jargon (for example, outcomes-based education is focused on identifying what graduates should know and be able to do to succeed in the future, then redesigning teaching, learning, curriculum, instruction, and assessment to help all students reach these goals; site-based decision making involves allowing a school greater autonomy in developing and monitoring school budgets, relief from constraining rules and regulations in meeting the needs of students, greater sharing among teachers, and the authority to make many of the decisions affecting students along with the students, their parents, and other community members).

- Show progress in student achievement through test scores; reduced numbers of disciplinary actions; reduced dropout rates; increased involvement of the community in school activities; anecdotes from students, their parents and other community people; expanded interagency activities; survey results; greater use of resources, etc.

- Keep focused on what the community wants from its schools and question those things that don't reflect the community.

IV. MOVING AHEAD

School people who live in communities where their schools enjoy trust, respect, understanding, and support of what is being done to improve student learning have probably already built solid relationships with community members. They understand and anticipate the public's concerns and respond to them in timely, constructive ways. For example, one community was actively involved in restructuring the elementary grades, including improving transitions from early childhood programs to the public schools and implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum. Everything was moving along smoothly and the community was supportive and receptive to these changes. Yet when the schools moved toward an ungraded, multiage primary, a number of parents who previously had been actively supportive became concerned and felt threatened. After all, this was unfamiliar territory to most of them. School and community leaders were

sensitive to these concerns and made special efforts to increase communication about the new program, inviting the parents into the schools to "try it out" along with their children. This policy of active parent involvement, openness, and trust was successful in deflecting concerns and allaying fears.

However, in other communities, many groups and individuals may have little information about, or involvement in, their schools. This makes those communities vulnerable to special-interest groups. As communities encounter increasingly stronger challenges to education policy, curriculum, and practice, it becomes imperative for local policy leaders to prepare for effective and appropriate responses. In today's climate of educational challenge, successfully implementing change requires proactive planning and flexibility. To avoid conflict, community leaders need to work together to ensure that:

- The community is committed to educational quality:

    1. There are high expectations for students, staff, and administrators.

    2. Curriculum and instruction are based on research and best practice.

    3. There is ongoing professional development.

    4. The culture and climate of the schools is focused on students and learning.

- The community supports school improvement and understands it is a long-range effort, requiring long-term funding.

- The board is an informed body of individuals who: (1) stay abreast of current educational R&D; (2) visit schools regularly to talk with students and teachers; (3) provide for community input on their agendas; (4) understand the tactics of special interest groups; and (5) are knowledgeable about, and committed to, the laws which govern public education.

- The board formally approves funding, release time for staff, and priority status for the school improvement activity.

- Election campaigns stimulate community debate, discussion, and consensus about the direction of education.

- School and community members are informed about the school improvement effort, lines of communication are open, and there are committees, councils, and parent associations open and accessible to all; school and community members attend meetings, vote, ask questions, and share information; there is active recruitment of minority community members to participate in these groups.

- There are clear, concise, and detailed policies on academic freedom, materials selection, board responsibilities, and instructional hearings; policies and procedures provide fair process for all members of the community, and are followed to the letter; everyone is informed about policy or procedure changes.

- School improvement activities are widely publicized, promoted, and discussed and involve widespread participation by school and community members.

- There are clear, local standards for success.

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